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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study focused on the experiences of 20 teachers required to use portfolio assessment in a summer program for at-risk kindergarten and first-grade students. Three questions guided data collection: What types of information did the teachers aggregate?; What definition of literacy emerged from the acquired information?; and What guided the teachers' decision-making in creating their portfolios? Data came from student portfolios, teacher interviews, and questionnaires. Results indicated that: (1) the teachers selected a variety of artifacts to portray a student's literacy which resulted in four types of portfolios, labeled respectively "minimalist," "positivist," "compulsive," and "conversationalist"; (2) an equal attention to reading and writing and assessment fairness emerged as important considerations; (3) teachers contributed their attitudes and knowledge in implementing portfolio assessment; and (4) teachers believed that portfolio assessment became an assessment of their professional capabilities. Findings suggest a gap between the idealized portrayal of portfolio assessment and its use. (Three tables of data and a figure diagramming anecdotal comments are included; 29 references, questions used in teacher interviews, and the teacher questionnaire are attached.) (Author/RS)

Portfolios: From Mandate to Implementation

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Portfolios: From mandate to implementation

Abstract

This qualitative study focussed on the experiences of 20 teachers required to use portfolio assessment in a summer program for at-risk students. Three questions guided data collection: (1) What types of information did the teachers aggregate?, (2) What definition of literacy emerged from the acquired information?, and (3) What guided the teachers' decision-making in creating their portfolios? Data came from three sources: (1) student portfolios, (2) teacher interviews, and (3) questionnaires.

These teachers selected a variety of artifacts to portray a student's literacy which resulted in four types of portfolios. An equal attention to reading and writing and assessment fairness emerged as important considerations. In addition, this investigation underscored the contribution of a teacher's attitudes and knowledge in implementing portfolio assessment and uncovered the teachers' belief that portfolio assessment became an assessment of their professional capabilities. In general, this study indicated a gap between the idealized portrayal of portfolio assessment and its use.

Portfolios: From mandate to implementation

Many reports (e.g. Applebee, Langer, & Mullis, 1986; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1985) document the failure of our schools to equip students with adequate literacy abilities. While some student populations post modest gains with basic literacy skills, developing more sophisticated literacy competence has remained elusive. With few exceptions, scholars cite lowered results on the yearly administered norm referenced, standardized tests to document these disconcerting findings. While not excusing the many combinations of variables which might account for these unacceptable results, the tests themselves are receiving close scrutiny. Scholars such as Cambourne and Turbill (1990) question whether current assessment practices coincide with our theoretical beliefs about reading development. The concern is that standardized tests fragment the reading act and in so doing fail to adequately assess it. Standardized test scores may be insensitive to real literacy improvements or improved scores may not reflect improved literacy. For these and other reasons, li eracy educators (e.g. Farr & Lowe, 1990; Valencia, 1990; Valencia, McGinley, & Pearson, 1990; Valencia, S. W., Pearson, P. D., Peters, C. W., & Wixson, K. K., 1989; Vavrus, 1990) recommend portfolio assessment. Portfolio assessment is a collection of student artifacts which is supposed to provide a sensitivity to students' literacy endeavors and a congruence with real reading and writing acts. Portfolios appear intuitively reasonable in resolving assessment concerns. The literature is burgeoning with articles that hail the benefits of portfolio

assessment and define, promote, and explore issues surrounding their use (Arter, 1990). Research on portfolio assessment is less apparent. The longitudinal study of Tierney, Carter & Desai (1991) and the PROPEL project (Wolf, 1989) are rare exceptions. The theorizing of researchers and the anecdotal accounts of practitioners using portfolio assessment can illuminate and persuade, but do not provide empirical evidence. In other words, the call for portfolio assessment of literacy seems to be flourishing in the absence of accumulated data regarding its process, product, and efficacy. Some might reject a reticence to accept compelling arguments and stories of success as a too conservative posture. I, however, want more research and believe others will welcome an attempt to shift portfolio assessment from a reasonable activity to a research based practice. No suggestion, no matter how intuitively reasonable, should escape purposeful and varied investigation. Clearly, much research needs to be done.

This study focussed on the experiences of 20 teachers required to use portfolio assessment in a summer program for at-risk students. This study explored some of the assumptions and suggestions provided in the portfolio literature. Three questions struck me as particularly important: (1) What types of information did these teachers gather?, (2) What definition of literacy emerged from the acquired information?, and (3) What guided the teachers' decision-making in creating their portfolios? The first question examined evidence accumulation.

These teachers were knowledgeable about a defined vision of possible portfolio inclusions. This question probed their implementation of this information. The second question stemmed from a basic premise that alternate assessments are needed to match current beliefs about literacy. Rather than assuming portfolio assessment would reflect proponents' proclivities, this question explored what a group of portfolios suggested about literacy. I chose the final question for two reasons. First, it linked teachers' professional judgments, an important line of inquiry, to portfolio assessment. Second, assuming that portfolio assessment maintains its appea and verifies its efficacy, the answer conceivably could empower other educators' implementation attempts. In combination, the questions addressed the process and product of portfolio assessment for these teachers. Their answers add data gleaned from a real portfolio assessment enterprise to the suggestions which, at this point, have intuitive appeal (Valencia, 1990).

Method

The program and its locale

In the summer of 1990, a northwest school district initiated an extended year program (EYP) to meet the literacy needs of at-risk learners in kindergarten and first grade. Being at-risk simply meant that teachers or parents perceived a student's reading and writing ability incommensurate with his or her age and grade placement. This program was in addition to other summer school offerings, some of which targeted children with

learning disabilities. Any student referred to EYP who qualified was accepted. Referrals came from classroom teachers and parents. The classes met for 6 weeks, Monday through Thursday, for 2 1/2 hours. Two schools within the district housed the program. Students were bused to these sites from 18 city-wide locations.

The program, funded by state and federal monies, emphasized an emergent literacy philosophy. According to a district document, the program emphasized a thematic approach to language development. Students were given many oppo~tunities to read, write, and speak. A variety of materials and experiences provided enrichment and background for student activities. Teachers were expected to adhere to a constructivist philosophy of emerging literacy and be responsive to the whole chil'. The same document designated the teachers' specific responsibilities: (1) diagnosing students using a portfolio approach to assessment, (2) providing developmentally appropriate curriculum for the children in the program, and (3) communicating with parents. Training conducted by a consultant from a local university assisted the teachers in meeting these program demands. I agreed to serve as the consultant if I could conduct a portfolio assessment study. The district's reading consultant agreed to this arrangement. Therefore, the selection of this locale was purposive since it allowed a topic-oriented qualitative study of portfolio assessment (Spradley, 1980).

Participants

The 20 teachers hired to conduct the 6 week class had varying professional backgrounds. The majority were experienced primary teachers. Two were recent college graduates and two taught upper elementary students during the regular school year. They received a salary commensurate with regular summer school and the option of receiving college credit for the training they received. The training started one week before EYP began and continued to meet one day a week throughout the 6 week period. The EYP class sizes averaged 19 students. The students had completed kindergarten or first grade and were randomly assigned to a class. A paraprofessional assisted each teacher with instructional activities.

Data collection

Data relevant to the three research questions came from several sources: (1) portfolios, (2) interviews, and (3) questionnaires.

Portfolios.

By the end of the program the 20 teachers had created 318 student portfolios. These portfolios were temporarily obtained by the researcher at the conclusion of the program for examination. From the onset of the program, the teachers knew that their portfolios would be collected as part of this project. These completed portfolios portrayed the *products* of portfolio assessment.

Interviews.

Fifteen teachers agreed to being interviewed. Teachers not agreeing to the interview invariably cited time constraints. Ultimately, nine teachers participated in ethnographic interviews. The interviews occurred after the program ended. In general, the intention of the interview was to understand the teachers' decision-making as they created the students' portfolios. In other words, the interviews helped explicate my understanding of the *process* of portfolio assessment for these teachers. Specifically, the interview explored the types of decisions they made, the basis for those decisions, the comparability of decisions between the students' portfolios, and the lessons the teachers discovered that might be informative to others considering portfolio assessment. A list of questions provided a general structure for each open-ended interview (see Appendix A). Each teacher agreed to record the interview. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and entered into The Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth, & Seymour, 1988), a computer program designed to assist with the analysis of qualitative data.

Questionnaire.

The district used a Likert scale questionnaire to survey the teachers who had EYP students in their Fall classes and, as a result, received the completed portfolios (see Appendix B). The questionnaire focused primarily on the teachers' perceptions of the portfolios' usefulness. Therefore, while the researcher did not amass this data, its availability and subsequent inclusion

allowed a consideration of an important area - the ultimate utility of portfolio information by the classroom teachers who receive it.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the portfolio inspection and teacher interviews were analyzed using Spradley's (1980) guidelines for domain analysis. The portfolio inspection began with the student portfolios for each teacher. Labels were assigned for the documents and, when frequency data seemed telling, tallies kept for their use. The labels, while determined by the researcher, often stemmed from language used by the teachers during the course sessions or in informal conversation. In other cases, frequently used educational terms provided a label. The goal was to have the selected language reflect the actual field situation. This resulted in categories called, for example, "yellow stickies" and "anecdotals." Ultimately, 20 individual charts specified the categories and frequency of these teachers' documentation. Next, the charts for each teacher were compared across teachers. The combinations of documentation distinguished portfolio "types." In other words, from the comparison of portfolios across teachers, a variety of portfolios emerged. Additionally, a componential analysis of commonly appearing categories, e.g. anecdotals, yellow stickies, and work samples, uncovered their particular attributes.

In summary, a broad sweep analysis of the documents in a teacher's individual portfolios determined dimensions of

contrast. Subsequently, portfolios were compared across teachers. This led to the selection of cover terms to designate the types of portfolios these teachers created and comparisons of frequently appearing categories.

The nine interviews were analyzed in a comparable fashion. Initially, code words were selected to catalogue individual responses. The codes were developed during the analysis and expanded as additional responses warranted a different characterization. The coded segments were entered into Ethnograph and subsequently printed for systematic perusal. The reading and rereading of comparably coded segments led to an integrated understanding of the respondents' portfolio decision-making.

Responses to the self-administered Likert scaled questionnaires were analyzed by the research and development department of the participating school district. Of the teachers asked to respond, 85% returned completed questionnaires. The compiled information was charted and made available to the researcher.

The combined information from these sources provided answers to the research questions. In addition, it expanded the original lines of inquiry in important but unanticipated directions.

Results and discussion

Reducing the large amounts of data acquired from a qualitative study to a coherent and concise representation of the findings presents a challenge. In this instance, one challenge

emerged when the data indicated the wider context affected by portfolio assessment. In other words, this study of portfolio assessment did not remain a classroom occurrence for a teacher and his or her students. Rather, the classroom occurrence implicated a broader cultural arena. Consequently, I will begin by portraying the complexity of the assessment event for these teachers.

Portfolio assessment as cultural event

A person interested in examining classroom teachers' use of portfolio assessment would logically examine several areas. Typically, these areas would include a teacher's understanding of a portfolio's attributes and his or her application of these attributes to collect and interpret data for a group of students. In fact, these typicalities guided the development of initial questions for this study. However, the findings from this study suggest a broader set of inclusions. Cumulatively, the findings place portfolio assessment as a cultural event which somewhat expands our previous conceptions of it.

These teachers did not approach the edict to use portfolios as empty vats and their predilections contributed to a number of initial concerns. First, the teachers had preconceived notions or attitudes regarding portfolio assessment. As Ms. Egan explained, teachers needed to "philosophically accept" the concept. This, in general, presented a foreboding task. "We knew we had to do some kind of documentation," said Ms. Carter, "but the word - portfolio - it's kind of a scary thing to start

out." Others, like Ms. Arnold, described a concern about replacing the known and comfortable with the unknown. "I felt like I was jumping into this hole and didn't know how to swim and I intended on floating which I knew how to do real well, and now I was told to do this other thing with it and so that was a real barrier to me." Ultimately, teachers reconciled their uneasiness and proceeded. Ms. Lewis underscored the belief that a teacher's inability to accept portfolio assessment would preclude his or her ability to teach in the program when she said, "If you can't get on the ship, it's time to jump." This mental receptivity, whether initially held or acquired, seemed to provide faith in the ultimate possibility for success in this venture. As Ms. Ryan explained, "I think once you philosophically accept that you're going to have portfolios and that you're going to build on them and have some kind of mental framework of what you're going to do with them and what needs to be in them, I think the other pieces will take care of themselves." Therefore, tapping a teacher's preconceptions about portfolio assessment and cultivating his or her acceptance of it seem important steps. Educators interested in implementing portfolio assessment who begin with the attributes germane to the task may appear to act reasonably, but these teachers' experiences do not deem this a viable starting point.

Second, these teachers construed a developmental, literature based program differently. Their interpretations became frameworks for collecting data and understanding student actions.

As a result, they influenced portfolio products. The variations in portfolio products is the topic of a subsequent section. For now, the pertinent point is that these teachers, although informed of the philosophy undergirding the EYP program and privy to the same training about literacy development, exhibited diverse professional beliefs. The teachers combined these beliefs in various ways which, in turn, influenced their portfolio conceptions. For example, Ms. Conrad valued a student's knowledge of letter names and sight vocabulary. She translated these concerns into checklists. As she explained, "It's important to me that they know letter names. And I have my checklist of sight words. That's something I'll test for at the beginning. That's something I want them to know." Ms. Ryan reportedly integrated her early childhood and gifted education knowledge. She "wanted to show academic growth as well as documentation...of social and management kinds of things...So then I really sat down from my experiences as a teacher...What do I really want to accomplish with that age group of youngster based upon the research." Another teacher followed "intuition" and "gut reaction." As she summarized, "I trust in what I am doing because I feel like I'm teaching in a complete manner." This teacher avoided structured checklists and records and favored student work samples containing her interpretive comments. These teachers were expected to embrace a literature-based approach to initial reading instruction and attended a class which provided ideas and opportunities for discussion.

However, these common experiences and expectations did not transform the teachers into like-minded robots. For these teachers, adopting portfolio assessment was not a simple incorporation of an alternate assessment tool. It was molded by their belief systems about children and their literacy development. As a result, for these teachers, portfolio development lacked the theoretical like-mindedness of those who write about it. Therefore, these teachers' disparate views exposed a political component of portfolio assessment. Its politicism does not involve the shortcomings of standardized tests, e.g. a norm group which may or may not represent the testing population or items which may be culturally biased. Its political nature stems from the entrance of a teacher's literacy knowledge and what he or she counts as a valid literacy event into the decision points connected with portfolio assessment. Therefore, a teacher's knowledge base shapes his or her understanding and use of the portfolio concept in assessing student learning and, combined with the teacher's receptivity to portfolio assessment, provides precursors to the actual implementation of portfolio assessment.

Recognizing the interplay of individual beliefs with portfolio assessment was *a priori*. Other concerns came *post hoc*. In other words, grasping portfolio assessment as an event required looking over time and beyond classroom boundaries.

These teachers felt pressured by "outside eyes." As previously explained, the teachers knew that a researcher would

examine their portfolios. They also knew the researcher's role was to understand rather than evaluate. In addition, since the portfolios provided program evaluation, the district's reading consultant intended to examine the portfolios. Ultimately, the students' classroom teachers would receive them. Ms. Connor explained one aspect of the concern.

> "I felt as if all of a sudden I was plunked back into college and am I doing what they're looking for. Not am I doing what I would need if I was a teacher. All of a sudden, BAM, I hit the wall. Like if you're taking an English class and they ask you to write a paper. You never write the paper according to what's in your head. You think, they're looking for this kind of theme. It has to follow these guidelines."

Rather than accepting the diversity that portfolios might acquire, they feared the existence of a checklist. Ms. Connor compared this apprehension to her classroom.

> "We say to our kids every day there is no such thing as wrong. We all have different ideas, different answers, different feelings. Tell me what you think. And we sit in front of these children and really suppose that they trust us. As a group of adults we ended up this summer going, 'Ha, ha, ha. What are you really after?' And it just caused this panic."

The teachers also had qualms about their colleagues' scrutiny. "Other teachers are going to look at this," said Ms. Conrad. "I think I was more concerned about that than I was

about actually what to include." The various interpretations of portfolio implementation meant their portfolios might not match the receiving teacher's envisionment. As Ms. Arnold explained, "If I get into a professional situation where I think it is possible that I can't live up to someone else's expectations, then it throws me for a loop."

Teachers are accustomed to private work (Lortie, 1975). In this case, portfolio assessment made an aspect of their work public. As a result, from these teachers' perspective, what began as an assessment of others became teacher surveillance. Wittgenstein (1953) anticipated this possible twist. As he explained, "The language-game of reporting can be given such a turn that a report is not meant to inform the hearer about its subject matter but about the person making the report...It is so when, for instance, a teacher examines a pupil" (p. 190-191).

In summary, this research became committed to the complex whole of an assessment event and, therefore, analyzed the complete context rather than merely the portfolio assessment segment. Initially, it unveiled a complicated interplay of events which occurred before and after portfolio assessment. These teachers brought his or her attitudes, knowledge, and concerns to this event and they impacted on it. The use of a portfolio did not culminate with its creation and this posed additional concerns. In other words, what originally seemed a bound classroom event was not. Therefore, considering portfolio assessment, whether as a teacher or researcher, requires stepping

back from the obvious concerns of portfolio assessment *per se* to consider others tangentially, but importantly, related. Only by embracing the full range of related issues can portfolio assessment be understood. Excluding these related factors may represent a streamlined concept of portfolio assessment but misrepresent its complexity. Portfolio assessment emerges as a social construct - the synthesis of assumptions, perceptions, and beliefs about literacy, learning, and children - which assesses student **and** teacher.

While maintaining this broader cultural perspective, I will now turn to other salient issues. The questions that initially guided data collection provide an organizational framework. However, I will at times stretch the original intent of the question in order to further interweave unanticipated findings. First, I will describe the categories of information these teachers aggregated and the styles of portfolios that resulted. Second, I will combine the definition of literacy that emerged from the acquired documentation with a broader depiction of the assessment event. Third, I will explore teachers' decision-making - the dilemmas they faced, how they handled them, and the suggestions they might offer others contemplating portfolio assessment. Finally, I will connect the assessment process with its wider context - use of acquired information by classroom teachers. When necessary, I will reaffirm the relationship of the parts to a cultural whole.

Portfolio documentation

An ongoing portion of the course the teachers took dealt with what might count as evidence for a child's literacy portfolio. In keeping with the temper of existing literature (e.g. Flood & Lapp, 1989; Valencia, 1990), these segments attempted to inform rather than prescribe. Teachers maintained the ultimate responsibility for creating their students' portfolios. Therefore, setting a number of portfolios side by side provided examples of how these teachers instantiated the existing recommendations. In this section, I will discuss the types of documentation these teachers acquired.

These teachers accumulated an assortment of documentation (see Table 1). No type of documentation appeared for every teacher. Not surprisingly, samples of student work appeared most

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Insert Table 1 about here

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often. However, a teacher's inclusion of student work did not indicate sameness. For example, some teachers used dated samples as "representational indicators" to show "contrasts" in students' abilities. As one teacher explained, she wanted the work samples to "reflect a complete child so they can be fairly evaluated." Another teacher mentioned the effort to avoid "stashing things." For these teachers, collecting work samples required vigilance and diligence. As Ms. Connor explained, "We had to keep up on

our toes." In contrast, other teachers simply inserted undated papers.

These teachers also differed in the number of samples they acquired for each child. While the average number for all teachers was 3, the range for one teacher might be 2 to 4 and for another 2 to 7.

Use of comments rivaled work samples for portfolio inclusion. Teachers made their comments in four ways. Some used post-its, called "yellow stickies" by the teachers, to keep brief notes. As one teacher explained, "I'd document those on a yellow piece of paper and just slap those in the file." Ms. Lewis created a summary sheet which included three categories: (1) language, (2) social skills, and (3) self-concept. Unbeknownst to her, four other teachers also used it. Teachers made summary statements, a third category, at the conclusion of the program. These statements synthesized information about the student. Finally, the majority of teachers using comments made anecdotal entries. These dated entries might appear on students' work samples or on separate paper. At times, the entries were descriptive, including comments like "the student provided the initial consonants for his dictated words." Others directly compared previous performances by noting, for example, that "today John used periods at the end of his sentences." Some notes were more general, saying that "Torrence enjoys writing about Ninja turtles," or "Bonnie participated more in today's discussion." At other times teachers used anecdotals to document what couldn't

be reduced to a portfolio "entry", interpreted as a work sample. Disclosing students' attitudes, interpreting a student action, or including family concerns fell into this category. Unlike the global summary statements, anecdotals and yellow sticky comments were moments in time.

The common use of comments triggered a closer examination of them. Specifically, this scrutiny explored whether the distinctions between categories blurred. In other words, was an anecdotal really a "yellow sticky" written on a piece of paper? In fact, differences emerged.

The teachers using the summary sheet implemented it differently. Ms. Lewis, its creator, provided statements and supporting evidence for each category. Ms. Alexander reduced the number of categories to two per child. Another provided summative statements without substantiation for them. Mr. Adams didn't use the sheet with all of his students. In essence, these adoptions seemed to reduce the complexity of the summary sheet. Other differences in the use of comments came between categories.

Remember a previous section when I explained one distinction between summary statements and anecdotals or "yellow stickies." Summary statements traversed events while the other two categories specified an event. Ms. Connor described the process for making summary statements. "I said I need to have a large amount of work in order to make any type of evaluation. That was my first feeling...After a while I said look at the kid...look at them and say, what major progressive moves have you seen this

summer - not can they do their threes forwards or backwards or upside down. And just let the paper work show how consistent, inconsistent these types of things...More of a global...Those types of comments are what I put down...It was more a summary of the summer."

Yellow stickies and anecdotals shared the specificity feature, but had substantive differences. First, 12 teachers used anecdotals while 3 utilized yellow stickies. This frequency difference assumes greater importance when the remaining dissimilarities are explained. Second, although teachers using yellow stickies and anecedotals selected a comparable range of comment categories, e.g academic ability or affective concerns, differences appeared in their frequency and wording. The teachers using anecdotals most often made sweeping, amorphous comments about a child's literacy. When the comments became specific, teachers made more than twice as many non academic comments as academic ones. The academic comments cited writing abilities twice as often as reading. Of the reading comments, word identification received more attention than comprehension (see Figure 1). The preeminence of saying words over

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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understanding their meaning or valuing a cooperative spirit while forsaking instructional intentions are issues discussed elsewhere

(e.g. Durkin, 1989; McNeil, 1986) but not problematized in discussions of portfolio assessment.

The picture shifted for those using yellow stickies. These teachers used academic comments far more than non academic. In addition, the academic comments appeared more responsive to a child's literacy. For example, these teachers were more likely to select a category for a student that would not appear for the other students. In general, the yellow sticky comments were more distinct from each other and overall more academic.

Cumulatively, these data further illustrate the potential political nature of portfolio assessment. Teachers collected different amounts and types of documentation for the students. They often made comments which varied in their portrayal of literacy. In fact, the comments often excluded literacy and recounted behavior. These documentation differences led to various portfolio products which may prove advantageous or deleterious for the students they assess.

Perhaps the elimination of a specific context from the theorizing about portfolio assessment created an idealization. Working from records of actual portfolio assessment embedded the process in a context. This contextualization of portfolio assessment unveiled previously unmentioned complications. Portfolio documentation differed in number and nature. Ultimately, product differences emerged, not just from the students' literacy differences, but from the teachers' decisions. Therefore, using portfolios to assess literacy may eliminate some

concerns that plague reading professionals, but introduce others. The next section further explores portfolio variations.

Portfolio types

These teachers' combined various categories of information which resulted in four types of portfolios (see Table 2). The portfolios had different attributes and their creators exhibited different beliefs. The most frequently created portfolio, the

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Insert Table 2 about here

Conversationalist, contained work samples and commentary. The teacher obtained a student's work sample, wrote about it, and inserted the work and comment into the portfolio. In essence, this interplay became a conversation between the teacher and the artifact. The artifact "spoke" to the teacher about the student's literacy. Since the artifact was inanimate, what it "said" resided in the interpretation of the teacher. In some cases, the conversation was personal, involving a piece of work and the teacher. In others, the conversation revisited and combined students' work samples and actions. This conversation resembled a group exchange between a teacher and multiple work samples. In essence, the Conversationalist portfolio introduced a new type of discourse into the assessment culture - one created by the interaction of the students' work and the teacher's consideration of it.

A second type of portfolio, the Minimalist, included work samples and, in some cases, the product of a classroom activity. These portfolios had a "*voila*" character - the work spoke for itself. In other words, the Minimalist reduced portfolio assessment to placing samples of students' work in a folder.

The third, the Positivist, had a range of documentation which excluded work samples and included formal assessment. The Positivist portfolio included four assessment pages. These pages determined whether a student could count, print numbers, identify number words, or name shapes, days of the week, and months of the year. The last page checked visual and auditory discrimination. Not all pages were administered to each child. With the exception of one behavior anecdote, the Positivist portfolio accumulated the same categories of information for each child. As she explained, "I need to know exactly what they know so I know exactly what I want them to do...Unless this becomes prescriptive, then I could say, this child was working with whole language charts on consonant substitutions, beginning consonant substitutions, so then I'd know that I'm doing this, not with everybody, but that's where he is. Or I might say this child is working on whole language and reading words." The teacher who created the Positivist portfolio expressed a high degree of sensitivity to student variables, but in some ways a covert standardization occurred when she created the portfolios. The Positivist wanted specific data obtained in a structured and organized manner to guide her classroom actions.

The final type of portfolio, the Compulsive, amassed the array of documentation used by other teachers. The *modus operandi* seemed to be, I heard about it, I saw it, I did it. "Immediately we began throwing together ideas that we could put in there that might be a good example. We did a couple of little assessment things and self portraits and stuff like that," explained Mr. Jamison. Some teachers expressed objections to this approach. "It bothered me this summer to hear people say, yea, I'll do that. I wanted to say, well, maybe I'll do that, too, but I wanted to know why are you doing that...I know for me but they need to know why for them and it would be different - completely different."

Regardless of the type of portfolio created for a student, the teachers emphasized the differences of the portfolios between students. The teachers cited the students' abilities, cooperation in completing literacy activities, behavior, and interests as reasons for the portfolio differences. To an outsider, the portfolios might appear comparable, but as Mr. Jamison explained, "They all looked different but they looked the same." A teacher might use "the same tool" or impose a "list," but students would particularize the results. "It's a natural result of the classroom that you're going to have those different branches," explained Ms. Conrad.

The Positivist, Conversationalist, Compulsive, and Minimalist demonstrate that, regardless of student differences or similarities, all portfolios are not the same. When a teacher

uses portfolio assessment, assumptions about a consistent nature of the assessment appear inappropriate. The existing variations further problematize portfolio assessment.

First, these portfolios defy a singular definition. These teachers selected categories suggested by portfolio advocates. However, the final products had significant differences. Therefore, what counts as a portfolio? If we object to a teacher's product, do we conclude that she or he did not really create a portfolio?

Second, the portfolio variations impact the assessment for a child. The resulting description of a child's literacy might change simply by having documentation acquired in a different portfolio mode. For example, the Minimalist, Conversationalist, and Compulsive collected written work samples to represent writing and reading. Under these conditions, poor writers might appear as poor readers when actually they're not. Making reading, an invisible process, visible perhaps explains the necessity for written samples. This dilemma doesn't, however, justify creating others. Perhaps poor writers would fare better with the Positivist who did not rely on work samples. The Minimalist refrained from any commentary. Does this actually eliminate a potential bias created by the commentary differences found in Conversationalist portfolios? Sociolinguists (e.g. Heath, 19[illegible]; Philips, 1982) have studied the discourse between educators and students and discovered differential educational opportunities. The Conversationalist portfolios might create

another example of these inequities by ascribing a cognitive state from a discourse between a work sample and the teacher.

Portfolio assessment presents a complex, and perhaps unique, set of challenges. The central role of the teacher in characterizing a student's literacy is apparent. Therefore, the question emerges about the concept of literacy these characterizations created. This supports the appropriateness of discussing the definition of literacy these portfolios portrayed, the topic of the next section.

Definition of literacy

Several attributes appeared across portfolio types. These features conveyed the context of assessment from which a view of literacy may be inferred. Rather than allowing a pure definition of literacy, the attributes disclosed the features that underlie how a student was judged literate.

First, literacy was a written response. While reading and writing share many features and provide chances for improving each other (i.e. Tierney & Pearson, 1983), an overreliance on written products to infer reading capabilities seems troublesome. Writing may present a source of difficulty irrelevant to reading comprehension. As a result, a student's difficulty with written expression may cloud a teacher's perceptions about his or her reading.

Second, a child's behavior mattered. The intrusion of behavior into literacy portfolios provides another indication of the inseparability of a child's actions from academic assessment

in a school-like environment (McNeil, 1986). The teachers understood this predicament. One teacher thought the comments should be kept but separated from the literacy portfolios. Another teacher believed that the behavior accounts should be included but summarized. As she explained, "I don't think it's necessary that they rifle through every transgression when I can summarize it and say, you need to work on these (behaviors) and here are some examples." None of the teachers mentioned how a behavior focus might cloud the perceptions of a student's literacy abilities.

Third, a person's literacy abilities remained the purview of a teacher who based his or her decisions upon disparate evidence. While many who write about portfolio assessment encourage student participation at many levels (e.g. Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991; Valencia, 1990), these teachers included students during the formative stages of the portfolio, but excluded them from its final interpretation. The age of the students and the newness of the task for the teachers and students might account for this partial inclusion of students. However, for whatever reason, these teachers' use of portfolio assessment offered students input into selecting materials but not in judging their literacy.

Finally, a student's literacy portrayal depended upon the type of portfolio constructed. An idealized portfolio allows an authentic, personalized account of a student's literacy. A different possibility emerged for these students. The disparity of the material aggregated by these teachers suggested the

assessment account might also be slanted. The ways teachers and students selected portfolio products might veil inequality. In addition, interpretive comments introduced additional variations. As a result, a child's perceived literacy abilities might be an artifact of the documentation rather than a representation of his or her abilities. As Mehan (1987) suggested, "Although it is incumbent upon students to display what they know, they must also know how to display what they know" (p. 126). Perhaps the possibility for misrepresenting a student's literacy calls for a renewed commitment to not merely suggest options for portfolio inclusions but to empirically examine the ramifications of selection and interpretation. In addition, perhaps teachers need assistance in noticing and recounting literacy milestones within their classrooms. Even at best, this leaves unresolved how to include important literacy behaviors which occur outside the classroom walls.

In summary, what these traits include and omit are problematic. In these portfolios, literacy depended upon a child's behavior and the vagaries of documentation selection and its interpretation. Clearly, the decision points students and teachers encountered and the stances they took influenced portfolio assessment. The next section explores the teachers' judgments.

Decisions - difficulties and solutions

The decisions these teachers made spanned the portfolio assessment event. At times, their focus exhibited a wide angle.

For example, they pondered the general nature of portfolio assessment, their beliefs and insecurities about it, and its ultimate use by parents and other teachers. At other times, they had a narrower focus. During these occasions, they considered their classroom and creating a portfolio for a particular student. Specifically, they labored with the constant updating of a child's portfolio and interpreting the data. In general, the grist of the event - aggregating evidence, managing its accumulation, and interpreting its meaning - represented their biggest challenge. As Ms. Connor explained, "I had that panic about what types of things I needed to put in them and if I was going to have enough." "Working through the particulars of what's in there was the hardest part," concurred Ms. Arnold.

In selecting and aggregating portfolio documentation, the teachers had to differentiate portfolio assessment and folders. As one teacher explained, "Even though for years we've saved items to show parents at conference time, I've been much more careful to try to keep them in some kind of order." Ms. Tatem added this explanation: "Well, I think my perception is that a portfolio is work that is collected and saved to show the improvement or regression of students' progress. The folders that teacher would save and have done for ages was just to make sure parents know what we're doing - we do math, and this is the social studies paper that we do. I think maybe the way I've kept papers before - the underlying thought was that I need to show parents what we're doing and maybe that's the key word - what

we're doing instead of what the child is doing." Teachers moved from a "collection of stuff," the typical folder, to a portfolio which they described as "a decision making device," "a complete thing for evaluation," "more particular," and "intentional."

These teachers tapped an array of sources in making these numerous and varied decisions. First, teachers engaged in professional, collegial exchanges. One teacher described these talks as "bubbles bouncing off each other." "I would sit with Joan and Carolyn and we would hash through this," explained another. Many researchers (e.g. Clift, Houston, & Pugach, 1990; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Roe, 1990) support reflection by practicing teachers. These teachers, perhaps because of the shortened day or the small number of teachers per site, availed themselves of reflective opportunities. As Rosenholtz (1989) concluded, "Perhaps the best weapon they (teachers) could wield against uncertainty lies in colleagues, particularly teacher leaders, within their own schools."

Second, the teachers cited the class they took in connection with the program. For them, the class provided a necessary framework for grasping the rudiments of portfolio assessment and a starting point for their discussions with colleagues.

Third, teachers mentioned their previous teaching experiences. Their regular teaching assignments provided a template for judging the feasibility of theoretical suggestions and a bridge to the summer teaching environment. Ultimately, these three sources and others of importance to individual

teachers coalesced and provided a source of help. As one teacher explained, "I took information from the class, information from the handouts that were given, information from other teachers - the methods they were using and what they felt comfortable with and that they tried and that had worked. I love seeing samples of what other teachers had done and have them explain it. Some of it was informally talking with the other teachers in the building. A little bit of it was from the weekly meeting that we had within the building." In other words, these teachers combined information rather than using a single source. Even the one mentioned most frequently, collegial exchanges, did not have singular influence.

These teachers combined their experiences to formulate suggestions to colleagues considering portfolio assessment. Overall, their suggestions related to data collection. Mr. Jamison's remarks represented the teachers' primary suggestion: "If you're going to put this here - A here - you need to follow it up with B to see the growth. Just don't put something in there and not show the end result." Other suggestions tangentially related to data collection. The teachers mentioned knowing yourself and your professional knowledge. "There are a lot of teachers who don't trust themselves to make those decisions (observations about longitudinal progress) about kids. They feel they need some standardized something or other to validate that. And I really think that type of teacher...is a long way from being ready for portfolio assessment," advised Mr.

Adams. The teachers understood the importance of goals. "You really need to know what you want," urged Ms. Lewis. Finally, these teachers were sensitive to the fragility of generalizing from their experiences. As Ms. Conrad cautioned, "This works for me and it might not work for you." In general, they exhorted other teachers to "just do it - just start."

In summary, portfolio development became a problem solving event which covered three general areas: (1) accepting the process, (2) understanding the concept, and (3) implementing portfolio assessment. The latter was the most effortful. These teachers tapped various sources of information to assist what Ms. Ryan called the "wandering in your mind" which accompanied each stage. The assessment event did not end with the development of individual portfolios. Rather, the students' next year teachers received them. The following section documents the teachers' responses to receiving those portfolios.

The classroom teachers' perspective

Results from the Likert questionnaire provided some general information about the usefulness of the portfolios for the teachers who received them (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Combining the agree and strongly agree responses, the majority of teachers found the portfolios valuable, easily understood, and helpful in determining a child's literacy abilities. A

smaller, but majority, percentage felt the portfolios allowed them to meet the students' needs sooner. In addition, the teachers who received anecdotals, work samples, and information sheets found them informative. These are encouraging responses, but prompt some additional questions. For example, did a particular type of portfolio elicit a teacher's strongest acceptance or scorn? If so, aligning portfolio creation with what's most beneficial to a classroom teacher seems advisable. In addition, why did the portfolios receive higher marks for their value, understandability, and depiction of a child's literacy than as a tool to assist instructional decisions? Perhaps the teachers perceived the information as superfluous to their own assessments or maybe something was remiss in the portfolio's construction. If an ultimate use of portfolio assessment is to inform other teachers, then questions about efficacious presentation become important.

Summary

This research examined portfolio assessment from the social context created by 20 teachers using portfolio assessment for their 318 students. Rather then constraining portfolio assessment to a classroom event, the investigation remained committed to a complex whole with all its ecological interrelationships. The insertion of a context problematized portfolio assessment. First, the ramifications of a teacher's beliefs and knowledge about portfolio assessment, literacy development, literacy instruction, and literacy indicators became

apparent. Second, assessment fairness emerged as an important consideration. (See Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991, for a discussion of fairness in performance-based assessment.) Teacher judgment guided document selection and determined its interpretation. These judgments posed potential inequities for the students. Advocates of portfolio assessment must acknowledge the possibility for coloring assessment findings and discover how to eliminate this occurrence. In general, the depiction of portfolio assessment offered by other literacy educators and theorists idealized its use. As Heap (1991) suggested, "Idealization gives us a context-free object" (p. 104). The possibilities envisioned by the ideal remain desirable, but literacy educators cannot assume that teachers embody this ideal when they implement portfolio assessment.

In summary, portfolio assessment is like assembling a puzzle. Puzzles can have different numbers of pieces and the pieces can be of different shapes and sizes. So, too, can portfolios contain different types and numbers of documentation. People working on puzzles leave them uncompleted, often for days on end. Likewise, portfolios are created over time. After the puzzle pieces are assembled, the "puzzle" becomes a picture. Regardless of who completes the puzzle, the picture is the same. Likewise, a portfolio becomes a picture of a child's literacy and, like a puzzle, must elicit a consistent version of a child's placement on a literacy continuum. Therefore, we cannot lose sight of the

reason for exploring alternate assessments - accurately representing a child's literacy.

The appeal of a model of portfolio assessment may disguise its role as a social and political practice. Literacy educators must remain as critical of new assessment tools as they are of those being replaced. This study discovered possibilities for unfairness stemming from portfolio variations. Other researchers considering the data from this study might propose equally onerous potentialities. In considering portfolio assessment, these disturbing possibilities must be recognized and resolved. This investigation does not show portfolio assessment to be wrong or untenable, but simply indicates a gap between possibilities and realities. Hopefully, the findings offer a provocative guide for further investigations rooted in the "muck, mire and messiness of experience" (Heap, 1991, p. 104).

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Table 1

Portfolio documentation acquired by teachers

Category	Selection
Work samples	.95
Comments	.90
Anecdotals	
Summary sheet	
"Yellow stickies"	
Summary statements	
Journal	.35
Student referral form	.25
Behavior	.20
Letters to parents	
CPS referral	
Contract	
Episode description	
Books read	.20
Classroom activities	.15
My name is...	
Pig book	
My beautiful book	
Egg to chick book	
Formal assessment	.25
Assessment pages	
Number assessment	
Informal reading inventory	

Note. The values represent proportions of the total number of teachers.

Table 2

Types of portfolios

Label	Documentation	Use
Minimalist	Work samples	.05
	Classroom activity	
Positivist	Comments	.05
	Assessment pages	
	Journal	
	Classroom activity	
	Behavior anecdote	
Compulsive	Assessment pages	.10
	Comments	
	Work samples	
	Classroom activity	
	Journal	
	Student referral forms	
Conversationalist	Work samples	.80
	Comments	

Note. The values represent proportions of the total number of teachers.

Table 3

Teacher questionnaire results

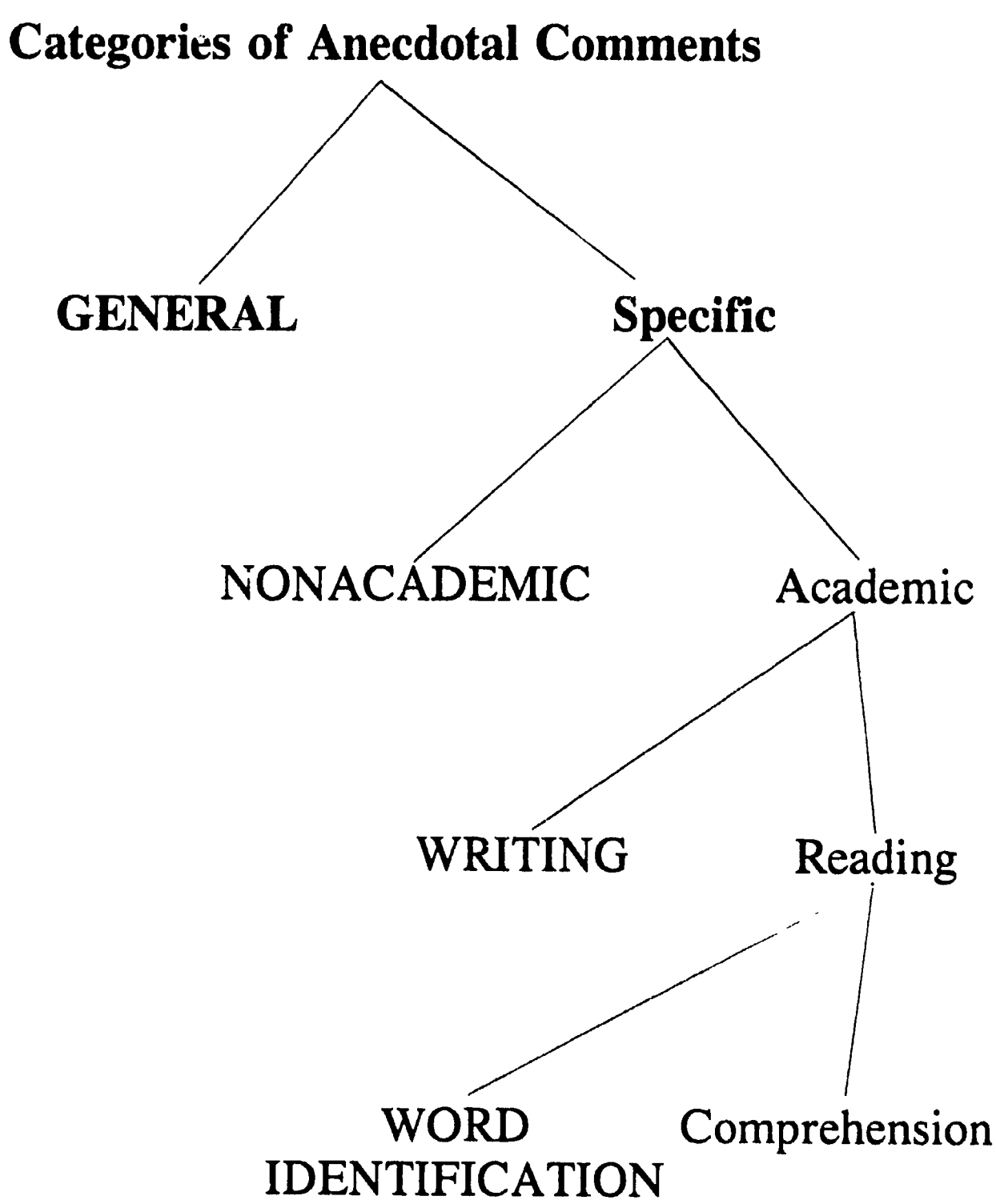
Item		Response				
		Strongly Disagree	D	A	Strongly Agree	NA
1	The portfolio information was valuable.	.06	.07	.64	.23	.00
2	Portfolio information was easily understood.	.00	.07	.61	.32	.00
3	The portfolio helped me understand the child's literacy abilities.	.02	.25	.48	.25	.00
4	As a result of the portfolio I will be able to meet the needs of these students sooner.	.07	.33	.40	.20	.00
5	A pre/post standardized test would have strenghtened the portfolio data.	.30	.26	.26	.17	.01
6	The children from the EYI program willingly engage in reading and writing tasks.	.04	.29	.37	.30	.00

Note: If available in your portfolio, rate the following sources of information to the extent to which they were informative or not informative:

		Not Informative			Very Informative	NA
7	anecdotal notes	.06	.13	.18	.35	.28
8	work samples	.06	.09	.17	.39	.29
9	teacher-made information	.06	.08	.21	.33	.32
10	report card data	.09	.12	.33	.27	.19
11	letters from parents	.06	.09	.24	.35	.26

Note: The values represent a proportion of the total number of teachers responding to each item.

Figure 1. Anecdotal comments.



Appendix A

Questions Used for Teacher Interviews

1. What types of decisions did you make as you were establishing your portfolios?
2. What information or human resources contributed to those decisions?
3. In general, was your decision-making the same or different for each student's portfolio?
4. What was the most difficult aspect of portfolio assessment?
5. What suggestions would you offer a colleague who was considering portfolio assessment?

Appendix B

Questionnaire Given to Teachers Receiving the Portfolios

1. The portfolio information was valuable.

2. Portfolio information was easily understood.

3. The portfolio helped me understand the child's literacy abilities.

4. As a result of the portfolio I will be able to meet the needs of these students sooner.

5. A pre/post standardized test would have strengthened the portfolio data.

6. The children from the EYI program willingly engage in reading and writing tasks.

7. If available in your portfolio, rate the following sources of information to the extent to which they were informative or not informative:

   anecdotal notes

   work samples

   teacher-made information sheets

   report card data

   letters from parents